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Saving the Park

A key to NYC's revival

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MAYOR Bloomberg has rightly won praise for his PlaNYC 2030 — a blueprint for a greener and growing New York. But today's urban environmental conscience can be traced back to the revival of Central Park.

It's easy to forget what neglect had once done to the park. Today, it's an 843-acre oasis — but back in 1980, years of poor management and inadequate maintenance had turned a masterpiece of landscape architecture into a virtual dustbowl by day and a danger zone by night.

That's when a small group of visionary citizens and public officials, working with the Koch administration, stepped in to create the Central Park Conservancy — a public-private partnership with the mission to reverse decades of decline and restore the park to its current splendor.

Twenty-seven years later, that partnership has succeeded well beyond anyone's wildest dreams, producing a rejuvenated park that is both the pride and soul of the city. The city affirmed its confidence in the Conservancy by awarding it a formal contract for the park's day-to-day care in 1998, and renewing it last year.

To undo the neglect and despair of the 1960s and 1970s, the Conservancy instituted many new management practices, one being a revolutionary new zone-management system. We

divided the park into 49 zones — and started holding each park supervisor and uniformed gardener accountable for the condition of his or her zone.

This system is directly responsible for improvements in cleanliness and productivity throughout the park — and also fosters a sense of ownership and pride among the gardeners as well as the volunteers assigned to each zone.

Other new policies dramatically raised the standard of management. Long before "quality of life" became a standard term in city government, we focused on small but telling details.

Graffiti doesn't last 24 hours in Central Park; visible litter gets carted off by 9 each morning and throughout the day. Our workers empty trash receptacles daily (at least) and maintain lawns with tremendous care. Broken benches and playground equipment get fixed on the spot.

You could say the rules we established in Central Park starting in the early '80s were a precursor to the "broken windows" approach that the NYPD — and now many other big-city police departments — have adopted to crack down on quality-of-life offenses.

The Conservancy model has set new standards of excellence in park care, with parks around the city and the world adopting our approach. While our prime mission is the care of Central Park, helping other parks goes naturally with that work. So Conservancy staffers train visiting gar-



An island of peace and tranquility: Lunchtime in Central Park.

Spencer A. Burnett

deners in horticulture, maintenance and management. Their expertise is helping to bring other parks to higher standards and, in doing so, improving the quality of life for communities across the city.

Last year, we created the Historic Harlem Parks Initiative — providing critically needed horticultural and maintenance support and mentoring at Morning-side, St. Nicholas, Jackie Robinson and Marcus Garvey parks.

The support of our thousands of members lies at the core of our success. They contribute 85 percent of the park's operating budget and have enabled us to invest more than \$450 million to help fund restoration and maintenance since 1980.

With nearly 250 workers, 3,000 volunteers and 25 million visitors, the Central Park Conservancy has elevated the way people use the park by creating a safe, beautiful and inviting space.

While some of us still recall the bad old days when Sheep Meadow and the

Great Lawn were urban eyesores, an entire generation of New Yorkers has grown up taking the park's now-pristine state for granted.

But the park's continued success depends on the commitment of all New Yorkers. People who love Central Park, and depend on it as an island of peace and/or recreation, should support it with contributions, volunteer work or both.

A generation ago, that small group of resolute New Yorkers created the Conservancy and saved Central Park. Their legacy now rests with us. So, help maintain our ballfields. Plant some bulbs. Make a donation.

Showing that we care about Central Park is a way of showing that we care about our great city — and about each other.

Douglas Blonsky is the president of the Central Park Conservancy and Central Park administrator. Learn more about the Conservancy by visiting centralparknyc.org or calling (212) 310-6600.